

CATS



The Official Journal of the Capital Area Timex/Sinclair Users Group

Presidential Ramblings

Fifteen of our group managed to find the Hyattsville Library in September. For our program Tim Swenson presented an interesting discussion of how he puts our Newsletter together.

Ruth Fegley gave a report on the Dayton, OH Computer Fest at which several dealers and at least one users group (CATS) had tables. We sold approximately \$70 worth of NL's and tapes. She said it was a nice gathering of some of the regulars. Not a lot of new stuff except for the Gold Card that one dealer was offering. See Ruth for details.

Our sharing session was great. Tom Robbins passed out some impact (NEC Spinwriters) printers - FREE! He might (or might not) have any left. Herb Schaaf gave a tutorial on dip switch settings for them.

Our picnic will be over by the time you read this, but we will have had fun there and a swap shop. At least three people will have items for sale. Maybe we can bring the leftovers to the next meeting?!

Mannie Qunitero has scheduled Herb Schaaf and me to present demos on the disk/mdv cataloging program that we have written for the QL on October 12 (in New Carrollton). These programs share a bunch of code, but Herb and I have gone off on different tangents on how they operate. They both generate a file with all directory information from disks, or mdvs, that the user can import

into ARCHIVE. One can then use ARCHIVE to find or print or organize all those files that get scattered around all those disks that we keep here or there. It won't help you find that disk that you forgot was tucked into the back of the QL manual - unless you recorded that fact in the ARCHIVE database.

Our future 1991 regular meetings will all be in New Carrollton, Nov. 2 and Dec. 7. Programs on new hardware for the 2068 is scheduled for November and of course, we will have a Holiday Celebration on Dec. 7. Then we also have the Linthicum Library (near Baltimore) reserved for a get-together on November 16th. We are on top of scheduling so, we can hope that next year we can return to the 2nd Sat. of every month.

GROUP BUYS! I forgot to bring this up at the meeting, but there are two items that people are seeking. The new keyboard interfaces - use a real IBM type keyboard on your QL - see Tim Swenson. The Gold Card - this is a new CPU/interface for the QL that speeds up the computer 3-4 times, has 2 MB of memory, and can access up to 3 drives (720K, 1.44 MB, or 3.2 MB) - see Mannie Qunitero.

Bits and Bytes: I got my Byte magazine today - parts keep getting smaller. One company expects to sell a hard drive that is only 1.8 inches in diameter. Such small components makes me think of our QL's - they really are almost portable. We just need

a solid state (LCD) monitor - anyone know if any such thing is available cheap? Of course we need a battery power pack too.

You ham and computer fest folks may be interested in an auction. A computer auction was announced for the MD State Fairgrounds on Oct. 9th, 1991 at 10:07 AM. Info from 703-370-5760.

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Key Dates

- 12 October: CATS Meeting
 11:00 Workshop
 1:30 Executive Board Meeting
 2:00 General Meeting
- 14 October: Newsletter Deadline
 For the Next Issue
- 2 November: CATS Meeting

Next Meeting:

Duane Parker and Herb Schaaf will be waging the battle of the QL disk catalog programs. Each has their own approach to their programs get the job done. Come and vote for your favorite disk cataloging program.

From The Editor:

Here we are with another small issue. I hope with the return of cooler weather people will spend more time with their computers and write more articles. I don't mind Monday being canceled due to lack of interest, but I hate to see our Newsletter go this way.

I've got a few pieces of news to bring up. A while back I got a disk of Dutch software for the QL. The three primary programs were QVIEW, QLUNZIP, and QBOX. QVIEW is a terminal program (in Dutch). QLUNZIP allows QL users to unzip MS-DOS programs that have been zipped with PKZIP. I've tested it and it works as advertised. QBOX is a QL BBS program. Before anyone gets too excited, the author of QBOX discusses the problems with running a BBS on the QL (mostly dealing with the serial ports). This whole disk will be added to the CATS QL Library.

I was lucky enough the other day to thumb through a copy of PC Magazine as it wandered through my office. John Dvorak writes two columns for PC Magazine. John Dvorak is one of the most opinionated computer columnists that I have ever read, but he is the best. He always tells things like it is. One of the articles, INSIDE TRACK, had some interesting news for Sinclair enthusiasts.

"Expect to see British inventor Clive Sinclair pull the rabbit out of the hat with a hot notebook using a proprietary Sinclair-designed 200 MIPS RISC chip that can emulate the

Intel family. The chip, fabricated by Plessy, will mark a new career for Sinclair if successful. Even Apple is supposed to be looking at this chip.

Details on the Sinclair chip are sketchy, but it seems to be a parallel high-speed chip. Sinclair is a believer in small data words in personal computers so it's probably 8-bit (maybe 4-bit). The parallelism designed into the chip supposedly allows it to fake 16- to 32-bit operations. This chip is also meant to be dropped into a low-priced super notebook computer also designed by Sinclair. The machine will run DR DOS 6.0 and a Unix/Mach-type operating system called TAOS."

To the less techie of you, this means WOW!!! Most 386 PC's can only do a few MIPS (million instructions per second). 200 MIPS is the power of a big minicomputer. I really hope this vaporware becomes real.

Another new item I learned this month (from Peter Hale's article), that the QDOS rights to North America is held by Mechanical Affinity. I wrote Frank Davis trying to learn more about this. I specifically asked him if the rights to QDOS include creating a new QL. He responded by saying that he was not too sure.

The uniqueness of the QL is not in its hardware but lies in its operating system, QDOS. If one could implement QDOS (including SuperBasic with QDOS calls) on another hardware platform, most of us would gladly support the new machine (\$ costs excluded). This has been done with QL emulators for the Atari ST and the Amiga.

If one had the know-how and the ambition, QDOS could be implemented on a new 68000 platform in a language like C. It could be disk-based and not ROM based (I don't know what this will do to QDOS calls) making it easier for updates and cheaper to produce. Changes could be done to QDOS to make it

more "standard" with such things as command line arguments.

As it stands, QDOS and SuperBasic are really one thing. QDOS could be separated from SuperBasic, yet still allow SuperBasic to use QDOS commands. This would be similar to MS-DOS Batch files and UNIX shell scripts.

The possibility and opportunity is there, it's just a matter of finding someone to do it. It would take a lot of effort to do this. The English QLAW group (working on a "Super QL") might have the know-how, but not the opportunity. As far as I understand it, Amstrad still has the rights to QDOS in the rest of the world.

Oh well, it's nice to ponder on it. Sometimes I wish I had the know-how, time, and (yes) ambition to do it. I confess that I'm a bit lazy. The initial writing of code is the hardest part. Sometimes it takes me a while to work up the energy to do it.

This should help fill out the issue and hopefully be interesting to a few of you. Until next month, same Bat-time, same Bat-channel.

Happy Hacking,

Tim

The QL in North America

By Peter Hale

A Short Chronology

[This article is a copy of a letter Peter Hale wrote to a reporter for QL World, doing an article on QL's in North America. - EDI

The Sinclair QL was not released in the United States until the spring of 1985. Many english QL's were first sold in the US by Bob Dyl of English MicroConnection of Newport, Rhode Island.

As with previous Sinclair computers the delay was a consequence of modifications needed to comply with the Federal Communications (FCC) requirements that it meet the standards of a Class A Computing device - i.e. that it wouldn't interfere with TV's, etc, in the home environment.

The North American version of the JSU ROM differs from those sold elsewhere. On F2 the JSU ROM defaults to the North American Television standard - NTSC - and sends the video signal at 60 Hz. The screen is short a line at the bottom and the graphics coordinates differ from those used in JS and similar machines. The computer itself was manufactured by Samsung in Korea and is distinguished by a steel plate under the keyboard, a number of undocumented capacitors added to cut interference, a spider board added over the RAM by Samsung to hold the signal steady, and 9-pin D serial and joystick ports.

Sinclair maintained its marketing division in Boston, MA, and established a warehouse in Nashua, NH. The only national advertising was through a flyer enclosed in American Express statements offering the QL for \$499.95. Others were sold through dealers and stockists who had been awaiting its release since Timex had given up on the T/S-2068 and ceased support and manufacture.

Sir Clive's financial problems came to a head at this time, and by the end of 1985 the QL was being discounted to \$299.95.

As with early QL's in the UK, quality control was variable. Many of the early machines had to be returned under warranty.

Although the QL was well received and supported by several dealers and magazines, the lack of aggressive marketing meant that there was not wide acceptance.

SUM magazine from Gainesville, FL, first covered the QL, then Time Designs supported it, along with all other Sinclair computers. Eventually, Syncware Systems produced Quatum Levels, which ran for twelve issues over a three year period, until 1989, when the editor, Tom Bent, became overextended.

During this period, Sinclair sold Sinclair Research to Amstrad, but not before the North American rights to QDOS were separated out of the deal.

In 1987 the rights, along with the warehoused stock in New Hampshire, were sold to A+ Computers, of Sullivan, NH, which continued to market and support the QL. According to their information they believed that in total about 9,000 QL's had been shipped to Sinclair in North America. They indicated that an initial order for 10,000 with Samsung was not fully paid for and that Samsung had held back 1,000 units until payment in full was recieved.

A+ Computers apparantly got the entire QL stock at a good price. By 1987 they were selling backup QL's (rebuilt units repaired under warranty) without power supplies for \$99.95 and not long thereafter it was possible to buy complete, fresh-out-of-the-box units for \$99.95.

Also in 1987, a modification to the MG ROM was developed under the rights retained for North America.

Known as the MGUS, it retained the original QL character set for codes above 127, fixed a few more bugs, added some cutesy error reports ("I've forgotten what I was doing" when clearing procedure tables in SuperBasic programming) and achieved a popular following for those who wanted to run European programs that mixed graphics and text coordinates on the same screen.

Oct. 1987, Bill Jones, a Sinclair enthusiast who had retired, started the quarterly UPDATE MAGAZINE to support the T/S 2068. Support for the QL and Z88 came later. The magazine focused on the needs of beginners, partly because Bill felt that beginners were always coming onto the scene, partly because Bill was a beginner himself and hoped to learn from the articles being contributed and partly because Bill wanted to keep from going stir crazy in retirement.

In 1989 A+ Computers sold most of its stock to Sharps, Inc. of Mechanicsville, VA, the major QL stockist in North America. The rights to QDOS and the rights to buy the 1,000 units held by Samsung went to Tom Bent. Tom later sold these rights to Paul Holmgren and Frank Davis of Mechanical Affinity, where the rights rest today.

Interest in the QL peaked in 1989 at about the time that the Thor XVI began to appear in numbers. Thereafter, many loyalists had to move to other computers because of work related needs to become familiar with Mac's and IBM's.

For the most part, the family of QL owners is over 40 years old. They cut their teeth on the ZX-81 and the T/S-1000 and stayed with Sinclair out of brand loyalty. Their computing needs do not require power/sophistication and they have a common interest in keeping costs low.

[In my eyes the QL with QDOS is sophisticated and MS-DOS is dull and boring. QDOS is more like UNIX than MS-DOS. - ED]

It is estimated that there are between 1,500 and 2,000 QL users on the continent. The figures are a bit uncertain since only about 500-600 are involved in magazine subscriptions, user groups, etc. The rest float in and out of the QL scene and plug away in a vacuum.

A pocket of users was recently discovered in the woods of Idaho and a least one user runs his QL off home generated solar power in a corner of New Hampshire. Few, however, have but one machine. Most have one or two QL's to use for spare parts, due to the unavailability of QL parts.

There are also estimated to be between 10 and 20 Thors in use. The figures are a bit uncertain because several users are known to have multiple units. One user maintains a huge Archive medical database on a Thor, having formatted the hard disk to let it fit. How does he back it up? By networking to another Thor with a hard disk!

Yet a new generation of QL users who never heard of the ZX-81 has come onto the scene, attracted by the low price of a 68000 machine. These users are interested in machine code and the ease of accessing the operating system is a major appeal. It is also a popular terminal for remote computing on main-frames.

In 1991, the QL continues to have a loyal following. Many QL owners have more than one QL as backups and their systems continue to grow towards disks and better printers. The Gold Card has high appeal.

Sharps continues its support of the QL and the minor software houses of EMSOft of Boston, MA, and Wood and Wind Computing of Cornish, NH, survive. [Along with many others - ED] The original Sinclair QL Vision monitor that sold new for \$299.95 costs \$275.00 used today.

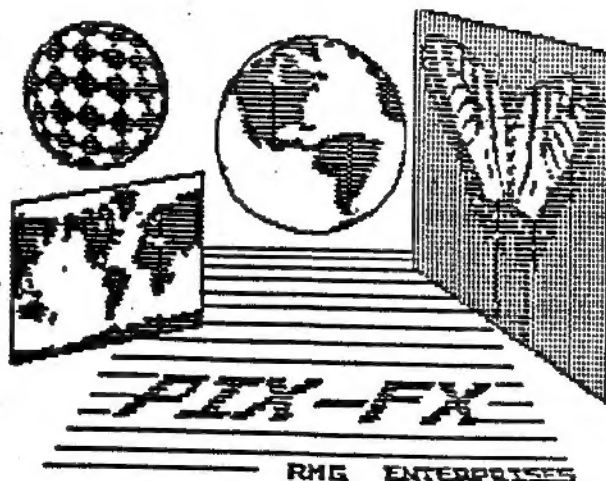
Mechanical Affinity of Peru, IN, has become the successor of Tom Bent and holds the North American

QDOS rights and the ROM modifications (MGUS). It maintains a growing business in providing software and hardware to the North American market.

UPDATE MAGAZINE is in its fourth year under new management because Bill Jones decided that he wanted to do some serious sailing, and the first Sinclair User Group dedicated solely to the QL, the New England Sinclair User Group, celebrated its first anniversary.

A rumor persists that there are 1,000, 3,000, or 6,000 JSU ROMed QL still held by Samsung in a Korean warehouse. No living person can produce documentation to this or similar effect. This of course fuels the rumor. Several hundred still in original packing are known to be in stock with various dealers in the United States.

The units theoretically held hostage in Korea aren't something Samsung wants to try to market here. Although the units might have a market in Europe, it is said that the reason they aren't offered there is the potential conflict with Amstrad over the rights to the operating system.



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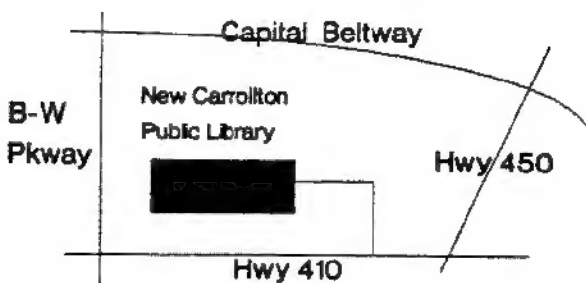
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The Capital Area Timex/Sinclair Users Group is a not-for-profit group devoted to serving the interests of those who own, use, or are interested in the Timex/Sinclair family of computers.

FIRST CLASS MAIL

CATS Newsletter
P.O. Box 11017
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The next meeting of CATS will be held on: October 12, 1991

11:00 AM Hardware Workshop

2:00 PM General Meeting

At: New Carrollton Public Library 7414 Riverdale Road (Hwy 410), New Carrollton, MD

IF YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER OF CATS. THIS IS THE ONLY ISSUE YOU WILL RECEIVE

CATS BBS: (301) 588-0579, 8-N-1, 300/1200 baud. News and general information, 24 hours a day.

Timex SIG on CompuServe: Wednesday night, 10:00 PM Eastern time (GO CLUB).

Networks

Memberships cost \$15 per year, are good for 12 months, and include all privileges (access to libraries, group buys, etc.). A newsletter only subscription is available for persons living outside the Washington Metro area and is \$12 per year.

Newsletters

Monthly meetings are held from 11:00 AM to 4:30 PM, on the second Saturday of each month, at the New Carrollton Public Library.

Meetings